

Pope Urges Just Solution To Lithuanian Standoff

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ROME, March 25 — Pope John Paul II appealed today for "sincere dialogue" and for a "just and peaceful solution" to the crisis in Lithuania.

Brief and cautiously worded, and avoiding any suggestion that he was taking sides, the Pope's remarks were his first public comment on the dispute. They seemed to be directed both at Moscow and leaders of the independence movement in the Baltic republic.

The statement was also the Pope's first entry into a Soviet matter since the Vatican and the Kremlin agreed 10 days ago to exchange ambassadors, an important step toward full diplomatic relations. Diplomats here said his remarks suggested that he was not prepared to let the Lithuanian crisis interfere with developing contacts with Moscow, at least not as long as the dispute remains nonviolent.

"Today, Lithuania finds itself at the center of European and world interest," the Pope told pilgrims and others gathered in St. Peter's Square for his Sunday blessing. "May the Lithuanian

John Paul speaks out but avoids taking sides against Moscow.

question find a just and peaceful solution, with sincere dialogue and in the framework of international order."

Like the United States, the Vatican has never accepted the annexation of Lithuania into the Soviet Union five decades ago. It has long maintained diplomatic relations with a Lithuanian government in exile.

With Roman Catholics in the republic estimated at 3 million out of a population of about 3.6 million, John Paul in theory should be able to wield enormous influence there. But Vatican officials caution against any expectations that the Polish-born Pope would inject himself into a potentially explosive situation. "Christianity may be an important element of national identity there," a senior official said, "but Christianity is not synonymous with nationalism."

"Gorbachev," the official said, "knows that this is not a subversive Pope and the Catholic Church is not a subversive church." This also holds true, he said, for the Church in the Soviet Ukraine, where nationalism and religious faith are strongly linked and

some five million Catholic worshippers are struggling for official recognition after decades of underground status.

The Vatican and the Kremlin have moved with stunning speed in recent months to restore relations that were severed after the October Revolution of 1917.

Mending Fences in the Bloc

Even before Communist governments began to collapse across Eastern Europe last fall, the Holy See was mending fences with long-hostile regimes. Since last summer, diplomatic relations have been reestablished with Poland and Hungary, and ties with Czechoslovakia and Romania are expected to follow before long.

The centerpiece of the Vatican's policy toward the East is the Soviet Union. Both John Paul and President Mikhail S. Gorbachev seem eager to insure that full ties are restored as quickly as possible. The rapprochement began with a trip by papal representatives to Moscow in June 1988 and continued last December, when Mr. Gorbachev called on the Pope in the Vatican.

The recent announcement that the Vatican and the Soviet Government would exchange ambassadors is seen as a technical step that makes the eventual resumption of full relations all but certain, along with a return visit by John Paul to Moscow. But for now, both sides seem to be leaving themselves room for further maneuvering.

For the Church, officials here said, the tangible benefits of normal relations are clear. The Vatican wants to make direct contact with long-isolated Catholics in the Soviet Union and to develop neglected seminaries and other institutions. It also wants to recover property taken over by the Russian Orthodox Church during Stalin's rule, but that, the officials say, probably will require direct negotiations between the two churches.

How a Pope Could Aid Gorbachev

As for Mr. Gorbachev, Vatican officials say he expects the Pope to calm nationalist fervor — and certainly to urge nonviolence — in regions like the Ukraine and Lithuania. Papal statements like the one made today suggest that John Paul is prepared to comply.

Vatican officials also argue that Mr. Gorbachev views the Church as a helpful ally for the restructuring he seeks in Soviet society, particularly in matters like encouraging a work ethic and stable family life.

Mr. Gorbachev acknowledged as much during his visit to Rome, saying in a speech that the Soviet Union had made a mistake in rejecting religion. He said its moral values "can help in the work of renewal in our country."